

Exploring the secondary school experience of LGBT+ youth: an examination of school culture and school climate as understood by teachers and experienced by LGBT+ students

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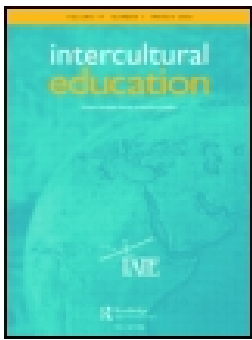
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Exploring the secondary school experience of LGBT+ youth: an examination of school culture and school climate as understood by teachers and experienced by LGBT+ students

Richard Harris ^a, Ann E. Wilson-Daily ^b and Georgina Fuller^a

^aInstitute of Education, University of Reading, Reading, UK; ^bEducation, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine teacher and LGBT+ student attitudes around school climate and school culture. Participants were 153 teachers and staff from six UK secondary schools who completed electronic surveys, nine of whom were interviewed, and students who participated in focus groups at each school. Results suggest a disconnect between teacher and student viewpoints regarding both school climate and school culture around LGBT+-related matters. Many teachers seemed unaware of the overt discrimination that many LGBT+ students received from their peers and that these students were mostly unhappy with the lack of curricular integration of LGBT+ topics. Findings suggest most staff are taking a reactive rather than proactive stance to LGBT+-related issues, and their ignorance of student concerns means little is likely to change. These findings reflect a heteronormative and cisgendered culture, where those in charge are not questioning cultural norms and the status quo. The study argues for a re-examination of how teachers and other staff interpret lived LGBT+ student experiences in these and other secondary contexts.

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Introduction

LGBT+ students are one of the student groups most often bullied and victimised by their peers in secondary school, suffer much higher levels of attempted suicide and self-harm, and leave school with comparatively lower levels of attainment (e.g., Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig 2009; Robinson and Espelage 2011; Stonewall 2017; Warwick, Aggleton, and Douglas 2001). Schools have a responsibility to address LGBT+-related bullying due to these concerning documented consequences (Vega, Crawford, and Van Pelt 2012); however, studies assessing to what extent teachers and other school staff are aware of

the experiences of their LGBT+ students are lacking. The present study examines school climate and culture as understood by Payne and Smith (2013) drawing on qualitative (student and teacher) and quantitative (teacher) data from six schools in the UK.

During the 1980s and 1990s, UK government policy helped to create a generally hostile environment for the LGBT+ community (see White, Magrath, and Thomas 2018). This resulted in many schools avoiding any discussion about issues of sexuality (Epstein 1994). Recently, however, there has been a softening of policy language, which has looked to lessen any stigma associated with the LGBT+ community via the Equalities Act of 2010; particularly, the designation of 'protected characteristics' included gender reassignment and sexual orientation. This Act means it is unlawful to discriminate against individuals who fall under 'protected' categories, and services must provide equality of opportunity. Furthermore, recent UK Department for Education guidelines specifically note the need to teach about LGBT+ matters (DfE 2019, 15). While some improvement has been documented, UK schools remain highly problematic for many LGBT+ students (METRO 2016; Stonewall 2017).

School culture vs. school climate

According to Payne and Smith (2013) a culture reflects the values and beliefs of an organisation and those within it, whereas the climate is a manifestation of this, where the individual interactions between members of an organisation determine the experiences of those within it. Attempts to support LGBT+ students tend to focus on improving the overall climate within a school. Different studies have identified various ways in which schools can improve climate. These include: safe physical, social and emotional environments, a focus on developing teaching and learning activities, the promotion of respectful relationships (Cohen et al. 2009); supportive staff, existence of 'support' groups, policies, inclusive curriculum (Kosciw et al. 2013; Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer 2006); clear school policies, provision of information and resources for LGBT+ students, training for staff and creation of 'safe' spaces (Russell et al. 2016). Studies in the US have researched the association between interventions to support LGBT+ students and how such students feel as a way of assessing school climate and what seems to make a positive difference. Many of these studies (e.g., Black, Fedewa, and Gonzalez 2012; Gower et al. 2018) consistently find that the existence of interventions is associated with LGBT+ students feeling safe at school and reporting lower levels of bullying and harassment. However, as these tend to be large-scale quantitative studies, it is difficult to assess the quality and effectiveness of specific interventions or dive into individual experiences. Payne and Smith (2013, 12) are critical of interventions that focus primarily on addressing concerns about climate: 'Niceness cannot erase the stigma – it merely asks students in the dominant majority not to be unkind

to those they deem deviant'. Their concern is that school climate-focused attempts to address individual behaviours without addressing the surrounding culture and the heteronormative and cisgendered social norms that tend to exist within schools are likely to be ineffective. This may help to explain why, despite attempts to promote a more supportive climate; many LGBT+ students still experience significant harassment in schools (Stonewall 2017; GLSEN 2018). Rawlings (2019, 201–2) concurs, claiming that misdemeanours tend to be seen as the result of individual actions which require sanction, 'rather than the social, cultural or institutional structures [that] allow them to eventuate'; such studies highlight the need to acknowledge the ways in which a heteronormative or cisgendered culture create the conditions in which LGBT+ individuals become the target of bullying or harassment. As Robinson and Espelage found:

LGBTQ identification remains a unique predictor of risk after accounting for peer victimization, raising concerns about policies that focus almost exclusively on bullying prevention to address LGBTQ–heterosexual risk disparities. Moreover, the nearly identical disparities among matched samples at both lower and higher victimization levels provides further evidence that addressing victimization while ignoring other aspects of the schooling environment is unlikely to eliminate disparities in suicide-related outcomes (2012, 315).

However, the easiest solution for schools and those who work within them is to blame individual students and/or their families for discrimination against LGBT+ students, and *not* ask themselves what steps need to be taken as an organisation to change the underlying culture (Payne and Smith 2013; Rawlings 2019).

The present study

In order to examine how teacher/staff views regarding school culture and school climate, as differentiated by Payne and Smith (2013) might differ from those of students, data were drawn from teacher and staff interviews and survey data as well as student focus groups and triangulated to provide a more complete picture of the different perspectives of LGBT+ youngsters' experiences. Much of the literature presents a relatively simple relationship between the existence of interventions and an improved climate from either a teacher or student perspective, but this study examines general school culture and climate from a teacher perspective and how that is experienced by students. School policy documents were also analysed, but the corresponding findings related to these documents are beyond the scope of this article and will be published elsewhere.

Methodology

Participants

Data were collected between May and September 2019. Purposeful (Creswell, Vicki, and Clark 2011) and convenience sampling were combined to make best

use of limited resources and select knowledgeable participants for the qualitative phases of the study. The six participating secondary schools (see Table 1) were all state-maintained schools; five had students aged 11–18 and one aged 14–18 (a specialist technology college). Names of schools and participants are changed.

Qualitative data

Nine teachers from five schools were interviewed by phone,¹ selected randomly per school from those who had marked their willingness to participate further on the survey. Interviews consisted of two parts. The first was semi-structured and explored teachers' personal and professional experience of LGBT+ matters, perceptions of how supportive their schools were of LGBT+ students, and their confidence in teaching about LGBT+ issues/topics. The second was based around a series of scenarios, designed to systematically examine their attitudes, values and beliefs about LGBT+-related issues in schools (see Appendix).

Focus groups of LGBT+ students and, in some schools, their friends, were conducted in each school (Yew Tree = 5 students, Oak Tree = 1,² Elm Tree = 14, Ash Tree = 4, Rowan Tree = 8, Fir Tree = 6). School staff selected students. Focus group participants were asked about their experiences of staff actions regarding LGBT+ matters and the inclusion of LGBT+ issues within the school curriculum.

Quantitative data

Quantitative sample description

A sample of 202 secondary school teachers and staff participated in an online survey in all six schools. The survey was disseminated from a designated contact point to all staff. The initial participation rate was an estimated 42%; however, only 153 of the questionnaires were deemed usable, due to missing data, leaving the valid survey rate at an estimated 32%. Valid participation rates per school were differentially representative (15–63%). Of the 153 teachers who

Table 1. Characteristics of participating schools.

	Pupils on roll ^a	% females/ males	% Special needs students	% of English is an additional language students (EAL)	% of students who claim free school meals
Oak Tree	1100	49/51	12	12	14
Yew Tree	1150	51/49	9	23	10
Elm Tree	1000	50/50	17	43	16
Ash Tree	1100	46/54	7	19	12
Rowan Tree	1000	49/51	7	12	7
Fir Tree	450	15/85	15	17	7
National average		50/50	11	17	14

^aThe number of pupils is rounded to the nearest 50. Data drawn from DfE (2019) www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables.

responded to most of the close-ended items proposed, 67.3% were female, 28.8% male, one respondent identified as trans and another as a transgender male; four respondents did not specify their gender identity; 69.3% were teachers and others were administration, teaching assistants, leadership or other support staff. Only 40% of teachers/staff reported that they had received any training that covered LGBT+ topics/issues.

Quantitative measures

Teacher perception of LGBT+ school culture. A four-item scale assessed teacher perception of LGBT+ school culture ($\alpha = .79$). Participants rated items on a five-point scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). Items were: (a) 'How often do you believe students in your school feel comfortable disclosing that they are LGBT+?', (b) 'How often do you believe LGBT+ students are proud to identify as LGBT+ at your school?', (c) 'How often do you believe LGBT+ students at your school receive positive encouragement from their peers when they come out to them?', and (d) 'How often do you believe LGBT+ students at your school receive positive encouragement from their teachers when they come out to them'.

Teacher perception of peer-to-peer victimisation. Three items were used to assess teacher perception of peer-to-peer victimisation at their school (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*) ($\alpha = .68$). Items were: (a) 'How often do you believe LGBT+ students at your school receive verbal abuse from peers (name calling, derogatory comments, etc.)?', (b) 'How often do you believe LGBT+ students at your school receive physical abuse from peers (pushing, shoving, thrown objects, etc.)?', and (c) 'How often do you believe LGBT+ students at your school receive death threats from peers?'.

Teacher LGBT+ verbal engagement. Four items were used to assess to what extent LGBT+ matters/topics were discussed by teachers/staff (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*; $\alpha = .84$). Items were: (a) 'I have verbally expressed my support of the LGBT+ community in front of other *teachers*', (b) 'I have verbally expressed my support of the LGBT+ community in front of *students*', (c) 'I engage in *formal* discussions with fellow teachers on LGBT+ topics or issues', and 'I engage in *informal* discussions with fellow teachers on LGBT+ topics or issues'.

Teacher perception of school responsibilities regarding LGBT+ matters/issues. A four-item scale was created to assess whether school teachers and other staff considered that it was the 'school's job' to attend to LGBT+ matters/issues. Participants were asked to imagine that a co-worker made a series of statements and to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .71$). The items were: (a) 'Students should work out LGBT+ tensions among themselves, it is not our job as teachers', (b) 'It is the school's job to teach about LGBT+ topics within regular

school hours (even if parents/guardians disagree)', (c) 'A lot of attention to LGBT + topics in schools might wrongly encourage students to identify as LGBT+', and (d) 'I feel teaching about LGBT+ related topics should be a major priority in our PSHE curriculum'. Items (a) and (c) were reversed.

Data analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were carried out concurrently. Interview and focus group data were analysed into themes. The quantitative data were analysed using simple frequency analysis and ANOVAs, which allowed for between-school comparisons. Results from the qualitative analysis informed which quantitative items were retained for analysis and findings from all methods were combined to enrich our understanding of LGBT+ matters within schools.

Results

Climate

All teachers interviewed felt student ignorance was at the centre of any troubles experienced by their LGBT+ peers. They were also all willing to challenge any negative behaviours and attitudes towards the LGBT+ community, although in the case of one teacher, Helen, this was a passive, reactive approach. She would not raise issues unless they were raised with her by students.

Students in Oak Tree, Yew Tree, Elm Tree, Ash Tree and Fir Tree, however, all commented that teachers were not very good at 'hearing' verbal abuse directed at LGBT+ students. They were invisible around the school so were unable to intervene to prevent harassment, and when bullying was dealt with it was largely ineffectual. For example, one student said:

I despise school ... for the past two years of school [teachers] would roll it over their shoulders or just dismiss it and nothing would happen, and it's only got worse (Yew Tree, M1).

Although the teachers interviewed said they dealt with issues, it is probable that they do so on an individual level because of their close connection to the LGBT+ community and are more likely to appreciate the need to address negative behaviours towards LGBT+ students. However, for many students this variability in staff action meant they felt unsafe in schools. They felt that *many* teachers did not care. Sometimes, when students stood up for themselves they were even reprimanded:

I get called slurs in class ... I had a cover teacher and she did nothing about it. Basically, everyone was being like 'you're gay', 'you're a faggot'. And I was like, okay and then

I responded aggressively and then the teacher told me off for responding, for sticking up for myself (gender fluid student, Yew Tree).

In Fir Tree school one of the transgender students explained:

I've actually been passing quite well I feel since I came here. But there is another trans girl in the school who doesn't pass as well and the things people say about her is just, it's scary. Because you think if they do it to her, they'd do it to me. (Fir Tree, T1)

Another Fir Tree student recounted an incident that very lunchtime where a trans student had been picked on by a group of boys, which he described as 'distressing to watch'. In contrast, a bisexually-identifying female student acknowledged, it was easy for her to 'go under the radar' and be perceived as 'normal'. It appears that students who identify as gay or lesbian, or in this case bisexual, but otherwise fit into social norms of female/male face fewer issues than other LGBT+ peers.

Quantitative data reveal that staff across schools significantly differed in their perception of to what extent LGBT+ students receive physical and verbal abuses at their schools, including death threats. Teachers at Fir Tree and Oak Tree perceived the lowest levels of peer-to-peer victimisation at their schools (see [Figure 1](#), solid line), for the most part claiming that students 'never' or 'very rarely' were recipients of such abuse. However, as can be perceived above in the student data, Fir Tree was seemingly one of the more problematic schools from a student perspective, as the student participants reported consistent bullying and harassment of LGBT+ students. Nevertheless, this was not perceived by Tom, a teacher at Fir Tree:

I don't think anyone would specifically be rude or bullying towards any LGBT student, it's more a case of they don't blink their comments with actually disrespectful or anything behaviour towards individual students, so you have to point out to them, why do you think that's derogatory and so on . . . I've not been aware of any bullying or anything, issues that these students have faced, and certainly it wouldn't happen in any of my classes, let's be fair.

Specifically, 80% of Fir Tree teachers, including Tom, felt that their students were 'never' or 'very rarely' the victims of verbal (name calling, derogatory comments, etc.), 90% felt that their students were 'never' or 'very rarely' the victims of physical abuse (pushing, shoving, thrown objects, etc.), and all teachers/staff surveyed (100%) felt that student lives were 'never' verbally threatened. These perspectives are in stark contrast with that of the Fir Tree student participants.

In Rowan School, there was a policy of zero tolerance towards verbal and physical bullying and harassment. The teacher interviews suggest this is implemented, and the survey data suggest a higher level of perceived incidents of harassment ([Figure 1](#)) amongst staff. Perhaps the strictness of this policy made it easier for staff to identify when action was necessary than at the other schools studied. Rowan School students acknowledged the school was supportive of

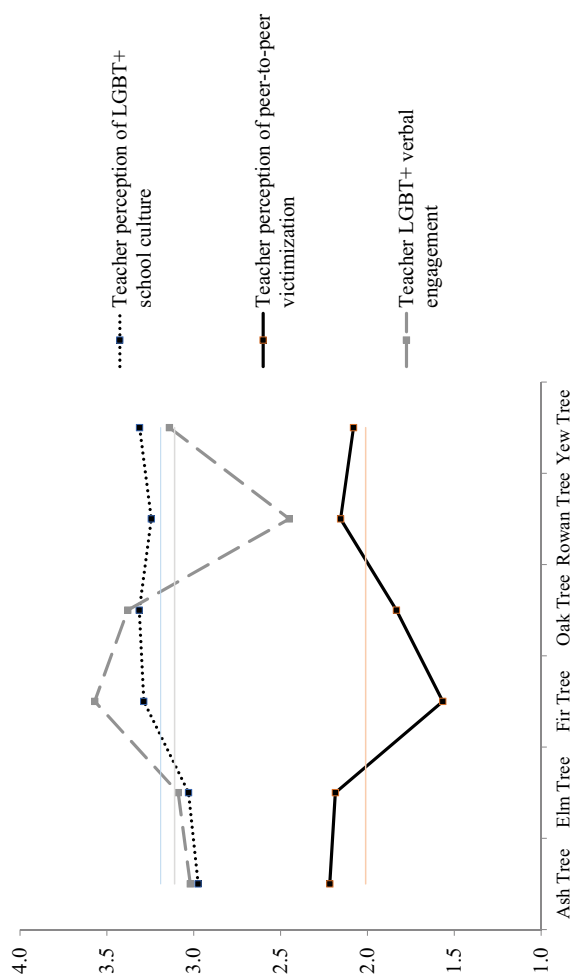


Figure 1. Teacher's perceptions of LGBT+ school culture, peer-to-peer victimisation, and their LGBT+ verbal engagement at school.

Teacher perception of peer-to-peer victimisation showed significant variability across schools [$F(5, 132) = 3.718, p = .004$]. Mean perception differences comparing LGBT+ verbal engagement to peer-to-peer LGBT+ victimisation perceptions were also significant across schools [$F(5, 115) = 2.927, p = .016$]. However, Teacher LGBT+ verbal engagement [$F(5, 118) = 1.877, p = .103$] and Teacher perception of LGBT+ school culture [$F(5, 134) = 1.568, p = .173$] were not.

them and generally proactive in addressing their concerns. They did report that bullying, where it occurred, was forced 'underground' and was less obvious to teachers, and could result in bullying taking place outside of school via social media. However, students at Rowan appreciated that any issues they faced were from a small minority of the student body.

Culture

Most of the teachers/staff surveyed,³ and all teachers interviewed expressed positive support for LGBT+ students as individuals. Importantly, those interviewed were a self-selecting group and volunteered to participate further after filling out the survey. All those interviewed had LGBT+ community connections either through self-identification or close family or friends.⁴

The quantitative data show that staff across study sites agreed that their schools were not necessarily spaces where their students felt comfortable and proud to come out as LGBT+ to peers and teachers. This lack of a positive perception of LGBT+ culture did *not* vary significantly across schools (Figure 1, black dotted line). Nor did teachers report significantly differing levels of verbal engagement in discussions with staff and students about LGBT+ topics/matters and verbal expression of their support of the LGBT+ community across schools (Figure 1, grey, longdash line); although, at Rowan Tree verbal expression ($M = 2.5$) was lower than at the other schools. As also may be perceived from Figure 1, schools varied in mean perceptions differences when one compares LGBT+ verbal engagement to peer-to-peer LGBT+ victimisation (climate) perceptions. Fir Tree teachers report an almost 2-point deviance between these measures ($M = 1.9$). This suggests that at Fir Tree teachers perceived not only lower levels of LGBT+ bullying (more positive climate) among students, but also report higher levels of verbal engagement in discussions with staff and students about LGBT+ topics/matters and verbal LGBT+ support. This contrasts with Fir Tree students reporting that they were too scared to be out. Also at Fir Tree, Tom cited the 'equalities council' as a move forward in student/teacher communication and collaboration:

Well, we do have an equalities council who are actually very prominent within the school so they will run events but it also, obviously, is a place or a group where they can communicate with each other and everything else ... it's student led in fact ... I think it can always be improved, but it's very effective.

However, most student Fir Tree focus group participants had not heard of this council.

The focus group data made clear that collectively LGBT+ students felt ostracised within their schools. Some students identified particular teachers/staff who they felt were negative about LGBT+ issues. There were, however, specific individual members of staff (many of whom willing to be interviewed for this

study) who were strong advocates for LGBT+ students. There was universal praise for these staff, who in many cases were seen to have made a significant difference to the lives of these students. In some schools, like Oak Tree, there were many members of staff who openly identified as LGBT+, and would actually attend the school's LGBT+ support group. The presence of such visible role models clearly had a positive impact on the students at this school. In other schools, however, it seems few staff were willing to be open about their sexual or gender identity, such as at Ash Tree, where almost a third of staff claimed to know *nobody* in their lives that identified as LGBT+, much less the two self-identifying staff members surveyed.

There was an added complexity to students' willingness to report concerns, which appears unacknowledged in school policy documents and by those interviewed. A significant number of the students in the focus groups were either not completely out at home or in school. This was a significant barrier for some in reporting any incidents, given their concern that their LGBT+ status might become common knowledge, and fear that this would be communicated home. This highlights that many students experience a significant sense of isolation in school. Even support groups, designed to create a safe space for students, often ended up being problematic in the sense that there was a certain stigma and vulnerability surrounding attendance to these groups. Ironically, these support groups, founded so that students would have a safe space where they were not judged, ended up being just the opposite for many. Students feared attending in case they were unwillingly 'outed'. At two of the schools, where support groups were initially held in windowed rooms visible to the students during recess, LGBT+ students felt that some of their peers would look in just to identify who was in attendance to use it as fuel for bullying later.

Curriculum

As curriculum can shape a school's culture, but is also part of the way students experience climate, we present these results in a separate section in that it reflects both. By educating all students about LGBT+ matters the teachers interviewed felt the general situation would improve in their schools. Those interviewed were supportive of making the curriculum inclusive, although LGBT+ content would have to fit in naturally rather than being 'shoe-horned' in; this however does mean any inclusion of content would be at the individual teacher's discretion and restricted by their knowledge and understanding of LGBT+ issues. Interviewees differed in their experiences of curriculum integration. Tom (Fir Tree) admitted that staff had received no training in teaching these materials and were expected to familiarise themselves on their own, but optimistically voiced: 'we're given plenty of material to study and everything, in order for us to be able to confidently run that'. In contrast at Rowan Tree, Mary explained that such issues were taught by a specialist trained team, but this seems the exception. Others

admitted that LGBT+ matters are discussed as a one-off topic, i.e., once a year in PSHE. Two others spoke about how they personally incorporated LGBT+ examples into their teaching – but as a reflection of their own personal experiences as part of the LGBT+ community and their own desire to ‘normalise’ LGBT+ matters. Although it is encouraging to see LGBT+ matters being covered in the curriculum there is a concern that these are largely confined to one area of the curriculum or to specific out teachers and not ‘normalised’ throughout.

While qualitative teacher input on curriculum integration was generally positive, contrarily, feedback from the student focus groups all highlighted significant concerns. Students claimed LGBT+ topics were largely absent from the curriculum. Rowan Tree students noticed attempts to bring more LGBT+ content into the Citizenship curriculum, but generally felt it was not enough. Students were only able to recall occasional LGBT+ content – usually citing one or two examples per year. Where subject areas had tried to incorporate LGBT+ content into the curriculum this was not always properly considered, e.g., in Elm Tree the history department had included persecution of homosexuals when teaching about Nazi persecution of the Jews, but as the students observed this merely presented them as victims. A few students felt LGBT+-related content was integrated in their A levels and would have appreciated this during their compulsory education.

Many students also highlighted the heteronormative and cisgendered perspective of RSE (Relationships and Sex Education), compulsory in UK secondary schools. Students in Rowan Tree felt the situation was improving in RSE, and they were having input into the curriculum to address this. In the teacher interviews all the staff indicated *if* they were aware of this as a complaint raised by LGBT+ students they would be willing to take this further, showing they would react positively. However, they seemed unaware that LGBT+ students were unhappy. This suggests teachers are taking a reactive rather than proactive stance, and their ignorance of student concerns meant little would be likely to change; reflecting a heteronormative and cisgendered culture, where staff are not questioning cultural norms and the status quo.

Discussion

Analysis of the data highlights two largely-interconnected issues. The first is around the surprising disconnect between student experiences and the views that teachers have of these, and the second, of a deeper school culture reflecting a heteronormative and cisgendered set of norms and associated challenges.

Disconnect between student experiences and the views that teachers have of these

One of the grave concerns emerging from the data is the difference in perception of teaching staff and LGBT+ students at some schools. An example in point

is the perspective of Tom, a teacher at Fir Tree, on the effectiveness of the student-led 'equalities council'. This contrasts with the lack of awareness of many of the LGBTQ+ students in Fir Tree's focus group of the existence of this support group, meaning that its effectiveness for most of these particular individuals up to that point was nil.

Other differences in teacher and student perceptions were even more worrisome. Fir Tree teachers surveyed mostly felt that their students were 'never' or 'very rarely' the victims of verbal or physical abuse. However, the student focus group participants referenced treatment of peers described as 'scary' and 'distressing to watch' and most of the student participants from this school were too frightened to be out at school. Fir Tree teachers seem unaware of this extended fear as this was the school whose staff collectively perceived the lowest level of bullying.

Similarly, some of the students spoke about the daily abuse they have faced, and many were critical of the way the school had often failed to make them feel safe. Also, according to students, as found in Smith and Smith (1998), teachers in most schools had difficulties 'hearing' verbal abuse. Many students however did acknowledge that the situation was improving, somewhat in line with Stonewall (2017) findings; this was largely due to the efforts of individual teachers and the development of support groups (with the caveats noted earlier). The data presented here does not, however, support the view found in some research (e.g., McCormack and Anderson 2010; White, Magrath, and Thomas 2018), which argues there has been a significant shift in attitudes and that homophobia, rather than homosexuality, was stigmatised. The issue may be that these studies have focused more specifically on the experience of homosexual and bisexual males; seemingly these are currently 'more acceptable' ways of being LGBTQ+. Some LGBTQ+ students revealed relatively positive experiences in school – and claimed to experience comparative 'privilege', as one student put it, evidencing that some forms of being LGBTQ+ are less socially acceptable than others.

Teachers likewise seem unaware of a strong sense of isolation that many LGBTQ+ students suffer, especially in the case of those students who are not yet out at home and/or at school. Several students spoke of becoming aware of their LGBTQ+ identity in primary school and felt unable to confide in friends or family until a few years later in secondary school. Having to come to terms with an identity that does not comfortably fit into a heteronormative and cisgendered culture is a significant challenge for young people. Being unable to talk about this to peers or staff because of a prevailing culture furthers this sense of isolation. As Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006, 585) write 'adolescents may be reluctant to report even the most severe victimization if they perceive school authorities as unsympathetic, unapproachable, and unwilling to intervene on their behalf.' Suffering verbal and physical bullying and harassment is unsettling and generates a sense of fear, which can lead to LGBTQ+ students self-policing their actions, again further exacerbating any sense of segregation.

The mismatch in perceptions was also regarding the curriculum. In most schools where teachers spoke of the way LGBT+ matters were being addressed in the curriculum, modifications were seen as trivial by many of the students. Overall there was a general perception from the students that, although things were improving and that the situation in some schools was better than others, collectively the staff body were largely uninterested in supporting them as LGBT+ students. This is at odds with the survey data which showed that nearly all teachers felt it was their responsibility to address LGBT+ matters. However, it is important to note that an estimated 32% of teachers/staff filled out most of the survey, this likely including a higher portion of supportive teachers willing to dedicate over 30 min to sharing their views on LGBT+ matters in their schools.

Climate vs. culture concerns

Importantly, all teachers interviewed felt that ignorance of students was at the heart of any troubles experienced by their LGBT+ peers, seemingly placing the blame of issues faced on individual students and their families. This is in line with Rawlings (2019) and Payne and Smith (2013) dealing with individuals who transgress and engage in bullying actions is emphasised without taking action to change the school culture as a whole. As Formby (2015, 267) argues, policy discourse also tends to position LGBT+ youth as victims, which ‘may have a distancing or numbing effect, preventing practitioners from understanding their own potential role in contributing to heteronormative school environments’. The danger is that the institutional focus is on the ‘victims’ and the ‘bullies’ and by addressing this institutions feel they are fulfilling their duties to these young people, whereas they ought to be questioning the prevailing normative assumptions that govern relationships within the school environment. Our quantitative data do show one area where student and teacher perceptions match: schools have not created a culture where students feel comfortable disclosing that they are LGBT+ or are proud to identify as LGBT+ at their school. Contrarily, also in the quantitative data, we identified schools where even staff seemingly did not feel comfortable coming out to colleagues.

As mentioned earlier, this study makes clear that some students experience less harassment and bullying than others. Those who tend to be ‘quiet’ about advertising their sexuality or who appear as more ‘normal’ than others seem to experience less harassment. Those who are more overt about their sexuality, who express pride in their identity and/or are gender fluid or transgender appear to be the focus of more negative attention. This requires a more systemic critique of the way schools operate if being LGBT+ is to be normalised and therefore not seen as ‘other’.

The issues around the curriculum are reminiscent of the debates around minority ethnic groups and their marginalisation in the curriculum documented elsewhere (see Epstein 2009; Harris and Reynolds 2014; Wilkinson 2014). The

same case can be made for LGBT+ youth, whose experiences are not reflected in the curriculum. Although there is a move towards including LGBT+ issues in the new Relationship and Sex Education guidelines (DfE 2019), many students in this study experienced a largely heteronormative sex education and where LGBT+ issues were encountered these tended to be one-off sessions, which is expressly counter to what the guidelines recommend (DfE 2019, 15).

Although individual teachers mentioned how they looked to include LGBT+ examples in their teaching, this has largely gone unnoticed by student participants. This matters for two reasons. Firstly, those students who identify as LGBT+ fail to encounter any relevant examples or role models in the curriculum relating to their sense of identity serving to emphasise their difference. Secondly, non-LGBT+ students do not encounter LGBT+ examples in their studies and therefore are unlikely to see LGBT+ issues as normal. In both instances the impact is likely to heighten LGBT+ marginalisation.

The data presented here highlight that introducing recommended solutions, such as support groups, can be in some ways counterproductive given the prevailing heteronormative and cisgendered cultures at the schools. The literature (e.g., Cohen et al. 2009; Gower et al. 2018; Kosciw et al. 2013) presents the existence of such groups as uniformly positive and fails to acknowledge some of the concerns around such groups encountered in this study. A number of focus group participants were scared to attend such groups as they feared their participation would out them to the wider school community. The location of these groups also was problematic, with meetings held in particularly visible places seen as leading to further harassment for those who attended. These groups, created with the best intentions to act as 'safe' spaces (e.g., Russell et al. 2016) were consequently often seen as the opposite. On the one hand, these groups are important, as the students who join them find them a valuable source of support. They receive affirmation from peers within the group and those teachers associated with the groups. Yet, joining a group is a commitment to coming out and therefore becoming the potential target of abuse. Comfort in joining such a group seems in part determined by the prevailing heteronormative and cisgendered culture in schools. A failure to address these and to normalise LGBT+ issues more widely means the existence of these groups reinforces a sense of 'otherness', for both those in and outside the group.

At the heart of any change is a focus on the school culture and a critiquing of heteronormative and cisgendered norms (Payne and Smith 2013; Rawlings 2019; Robinson, and Espelage). Teacher/staff awareness of student experiences, as well as critical awareness of existing heteronormative and cisgendered norms in their schools is crucial. However, without a thorough and careful understanding of how to normalise being LGBT+ and ensuring this becomes part of the culture of the institution, other interventions (although helpful) are unlikely to make a significant difference to the experiences of young people who identify as LGBT+.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, due to a technical problem, four of the interviews failed to record, so the data presented is based on the five transcripts of the recorded interviews, supplemented by notes from the other four interviews.
2. This was due to staff absence on the day, so students were unaware of where and when the meeting was happening. One of the researchers was however already familiar with a number of the students having interviewed them for a previous project.
3. Most of the school teachers and other staff surveyed considered that it was indeed the 'school's job' to attend to LGBT+ matters/issues ($M = 4.0$ on a 5-point scale) with only 7.1% of those surveyed averaging a less-than-middling response to the items on this scale.
4. Ned (from Oak Tree) identifies as a trans man, Ray (Rowan Tree) identifies as gay, Mary (also from Rowan Tree), Helen and Rachel (Yew Tree), Angela and Tom (Fir Tree) all have close family members who identify as LGBT+. Tom (Fir Tree) has also worked with LGBT+ colleagues in different professional capacities. Anne (Oak Tree) and Liam (Ash Tree) both had friends who identified as LGBT+.

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Notes on contributors

Richard Harris is a Professor of Education at the Institute of Education at the University of Reading. Their interests are particularly related to the curriculum, especially issues around diversity within the curriculum, and students' experience of education.

Ann E. Wilson-Daily is a Serra Hünter Fellow at the Faculty of Education, Universitat de Barcelona. Her interests lie in the areas of social studies teacher training and its relation to teacher action; including the potential disconnect between teacher and student viewpoints related to LGBT+ discrimination and xenophobia in schools.

Georgina Fuller is a final year philosophy undergraduate at the University of Reading. Her interests include feminism, voice, human and animal rights. She was responsible for all qualitative data transcription for this study.

ORCID

Richard Harris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8606-5515>

Ann E. Wilson-Daily  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5994-6210>

Data availability statement

Data are available upon request to the corresponding author.

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Appendix

Indicative questions for interviews with teachers

Background information – has the teacher any personal connection/experience of the LGBT+ community

What does the school do to support students who identify as LGBT+? How well do you think this is working? Please give examples.

What support have the staff been given to support students/teach about LGBT+ issues? Are staff given clear guidelines/support/training in relation to LGBT+ issues. Please give examples.

Have you ever had to teach a student who was part of the LGBT+ community? Are you aware of any particular issues that faced that student (if so what did you do personally or what did the school do to support that individual)?

What do you teach about LGBT+ issues in your curriculum area/PSHE? How confident/comfortable do you feel teaching this? What else do you think you could do to include LGBT+ issues in your teaching? (your subject area and/or PSHE)

Prompts – personal experience of LGBT+, prior training (what sort, where, when ...)
Please tell me about how comfortable you feel addressing LGBT+ issues within the curriculum (your subject area and/or PSHE)

Prompts – personal experience of LGBT+, prior training (what sort, where, when ...)
What else do you think the school could/should do to support its LGBT+ student body?

Scenarios

Your department is discussing whether they ought to adapt the curriculum taught to make it more 'inclusive' of LGBT+ issues – one colleague feels it isn't appropriate as it doesn't easily fit in with the curriculum, another colleague feels it is just 'political correctness'. Where do you stand and what would you argue for?

Imagine you teach in a single sex school and one of the students indicates that they wish to transition to the opposite gender but want to stay in the school. Should they be allowed to stay in the school. If not, why not and what should happen; if yes, why, and what should be done to accommodate the student in the school.

It is LGBT+ history month and there are some displays about LGBT+ issues around the school. At a parents' evening a parent expresses disquiet about young people being 'exposed' to LGBT+ issues – what would you say to the parent?

A student who identifies as gay/lesbian complains to you that the sex education they have had in school is purely about heterosexual sex. What would you say to the student? Would you take this any further in the school?

You are in a rush to get to a class. On the way you overhear in the corridor a student say to another student 'that's so gay' – do you ignore it because you may be late for your class and the language isn't that offensive.

A student has come out as transgender but has yet to start any medical treatment to support their transition. However they want to be called by their preferred name; the school has no gender neutral toilets so the student wants to use the toilets of their preferred gender and the changing rooms for their preferred gender; they also wish to take part in sports teams for their preferred gender. What do you think should happen?